COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

DESCRIPTION

Communication strategies help you to plan site-related communication with the public, other stakeholders, and your colleagues. Good communication strategies can improve the interactive nature of communication and help CICs receive information from their target audiences.

A communication strategy provides a structure for identifying events (*e.g.*, issues, problems, and actions) that require outreach; considers potential messages and audiences; and develops vehicles to deliver information. A communication strategy helps a CIC to think about and plan community involvement, which saves time and money. Communication strategies maximize shared information and minimize misinterpretations.

REQUIRED ACTIVITY?

No.

MAKING IT WORK

A communication strategy is the "why, what, who, when, where, and how" of relaying information (See "Communication Strategy Steps," below, for a detailed discussion). A communication strategy details the message, audience, potential vehicles, resources required, and feedback mechanisms. Communication strategies are blueprints for building a campaign to inform, and to be informed by others. Communication strategies also can be used to expedite the flow of information in sudden, unfolding events. More broadly, the analytical processes suggested in this *Communication Strategies* tool can help you think through your work at a site.

WHEN TO USE

When events or issues are complex or potentially sensitive, a communication strategy helps you to organize information and identify the concerns that may arise from such issues. By planning ahead with a communication strategy, potential misunderstandings about difficult issues can be avoided. Keep in mind that communication strategies are available to the public via the Freedom of Information Act. A communication strategy also should be used when time is of the essence. A successful communication strategy should ensure rapid information exchange during emergencies. A communication strategy encourages an early analysis of participants and their roles so that expectations and communication needs can be identified and fulfilled throughout an event or project. The communication strategy should be incorporated as part of the *Community Involvement Plan*.

HOW TO USE

A communication strategy is a list of messages, audiences, potential message vehicles, resources required, and feedback mechanisms to meet the unique communication needs of a Superfund Site. These needs are outlined in the *Community Involvement Plan* prepared for each site. In these cases the Community Involvement Plan serves as a communication strategy for the site. Message-specific communication strategies contain the exact details of message content, audience, and delivery for the individual messages you will develop. You will develop one overall communication strategy and many message-specific strategies. Listed below are descriptions of the *basic steps* for writing communication strategies. They are organized by: Why, What, Who, When, Where, and How.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Why

The first step in developing a communication strategy is to determine why the communication is necessary. Toward this end, you should spend some time defining a single, focused message that requires communication. Ask yourself: *What is the issue to which EPA is responding?* or *What is the action that EPA is taking that warrants development of a strategy?*

Also, decide what you want to achieve with the communication. Are you are providing information, increasing awareness, encouraging action, building consensus, changing behavior, promoting community participation, resolving conflict, asking for a response, or something else? Your communication goal, once developed, can be stated as part of your message: "Act Now" or "Get Involved."

What

To determine what you want to communicate, identify and define all messages. This step in creating a communication strategy might involve a brainstorming session where all possible message ideas are listed. Once listed, the messages can be studied and stated more completely. Next rank message priority. Focus on two to three key messages and rank them by importance, timeliness, or other factors. While your strategy's approach for communicating might be based on Superfund cleanup pipeline milestones, the approach should be flexible enough to adapt as site characteristics and schedules unfold.

Who

To determine who you are communicating with, identify all potential audiences. Once messages are identified, ask yourself: *Who is involved, affected, interested? Is there an obvious audience? Why are they obvious? Are there others who may be affected? Are there traditionally under-represented groups that need to be reached? What information do they already have? What information do they need? What are their concerns? How are they likely to react?* By answering the potential audience questions (see above) you will improve the effectiveness of the message and increase the efficiency of the delivery mechanism to be developed (see **How**, below). For help, consider the varied audiences who are likely to attend the events listed below in **Where**.

When

Identify when communication will be best received. This involves thinking about whether your audience prefers to be reached on weekdays or weekends, mornings or evenings, at work or at home. Build in time for producing materials and advance notice of events.

Where

Consider options for where the message will be delivered. When and where a message is best delivered are closely related ideas. As an exercise toward understanding this relationship, you might brainstorm about potential places and settings where messages might be delivered (see below, "Related Tools/Resource in the Toolkit"). Here are a few options:

- Availability sessions/open house
- Celebrations/special events
- Community interviews
- Community visits
- Focus groups

- Media, including cable TV, display ads, news releases, and press conferences
- On-scene activities
- Public hearings
- Public meetings
- Public or private schools
- Workshops

An important reminder: all meetings, presentations, and gatherings held at a public facility must meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). For information on ADA requirements, visit the Center for Independence (CFI) *Internet* site: *www.gj.net/~cfi/ index.htm.* The site includes weekly updates and information about making your public space accessible: For a free copy of the ADA Guide for Small Businesses, published by the U.S. Department of Justice, call CFI at (970) 241-0315.

Analyze how the setting might affect the message. Once you have made a list of all potential settings for message delivery, analyze how the settings might affect the way your messages will be received. Will the setting be formal or informal? Perhaps "good news" should be shared in formal settings and "bad news" in informal settings—or vice versa. If the place where you plan to deliver a message is sponsored or "owned" by a particular group or sponsor, how will this color your message? Such analysis will enable you to harmonize place of delivery with message, which will help your audience feel your communication is substantively clear and appropriately delivered.

How

Determine measures for success. Determine how you will know if your communication goals are met. Measures of success may be quantitative, such as the number of people reached or the number of messages disseminated. Measures also may be qualitative, in that they describe the quality of the messages and the types of change brought about by their delivery. Consider a formal assessment of your communication efforts through the *Community Involvement Impact Analysis* project.

Explore vehicles and tools for delivering the message. How will you reach key stakeholders? Who will take what actions? A thorough understanding of related activities in this toolkit will lead to easier choices for how to present messages (see below, **Related Tools/Resource Sections**). Being the site CIC, you will know which delivery points are likely to produce the best results. Note that the reach and impact of your message will increase if the same message is distributed via multiple vehicles more than one time. Some of the vehicles and tools for delivering the message include:

- Briefings
- Exhibits
- Internet
- Mailing information
- Presentations
- Public notices
- Responsiveness summaries
- Telephone

- ◉ Translations of documents into second languages
- ◉ Videos

Ensure quality by identifying resource needs. Many of the best communication strategies are also the most cost-effective. For example, consider the speed and persuasive power of simple word-of-mouth information exchange. Your resource needs for such an approach are minimal. When planning your strategy, consider the types of resources you will need to ensure quality delivery of your message. In assessing your total communication budget, ask yourself, "What resources are readily available to me that will provide low-cost delivery options?" Once you have identified needs and resources, review potential constraints you might face and develop strategies for overcoming these challenges. For example, if you determine TV is the only vehicle for a message about risk but find that local television time is too expensive, try purchasing one key spot during a crucial viewing hour.

Deliver the message. This involves the actual use of the vehicle or tool to get the message to the audience. This step is not as simple as it sounds. Because this is the moment of interaction with your audience, your delivery should have style and integrity. Be yourself during this step; let your audience get to know you. At the same time, there may be circumstances when others would be better messengers (*e.g.*, risk experts).

After delivery, gather and review feedback. Be sure that you establish mechanisms for audiences to provide feedback. This will help you meet their information needs as project and message priorities change over time. The feedback will help you evaluate progress. Finally, encourage feedback by showing the audience how their input was used. Evaluate the results and refine strategy. Based on audience feedback and measures for success, evaluate the implementation of your strategy. What are its strengths? Where can it be improved? How should your strategy be amended to ensure continued effectiveness?

Message-Specific Communication Strategy Steps:

A message-specific communication strategy will employ many of the steps above, but will emphasize three components: message (what), audience (who), and delivery (how). Such strategies differ from overall strategies by requiring the CIC to:

- ◉ strategically narrow the definition of the message to one or two ideas;
- ◉ analyze the audience to ensure they are the people who need the message; and
- ◉ choose the most appropriate delivery mechanism from those identified in the strategy.

Remember, while you will develop only one overall communication strategy, you need to develop many message-specific strategies. Message-specific strategies should be limited to only those elements necessary for communicating efficiently and effectively. No extensive analyses of measures for success or resource requirements are needed. Although message-specific strategies can be less formal than the overall strategy, CICs should still commit some time to evaluating their implementation—there are important lessons to be learned from each communication effort.

Examples

Example 1: Opportunity for Public Review and Comment of Proposed Plan

One CIC faced the challenge of informing site stakeholders about an opportunity for review and comment on the proposed cleanup plan. After identifying the message and the audience,

the CIC decided to hold a public meeting to announce the opportunity and to invite interested parties to a public participation workshop. By holding the public meeting at a library on a Saturday afternoon, he captured a wider audience than if he had held it during a weeknight. He then identified participants to attend a workshop for the following Saturday. The workshop included information about: 1) requirements for public review of and comment on site activities, 2) pros and cons of the process, and 3) how citizens can maximize their contributions. A workshop hand-out offered step-by-step guidance for reviewing the site information (including what to look for) and for filing comments. The result: more than half of the workshop attendees submitted comments on the proposed cleanup plan.

Example 2: Deletion of the Site from the NPL

At a Superfund site where the cleanup was completed, enabling site deletion from the NPL, the CIC crafted one final message-specific strategy. First, she recognized that her challenge was to reach a statewide audience. Of course, local citizens wanted to take credit. But the CIC also realized that communicating a deletion from the NPL should include both State and regional officials who can ultimately give the cleanup success the attention it deserves by holding news conferences or communicating with their representatives in national government. So, she decided to let political networks help spread the word of the success. Next, she considered ways to frame the success. The successful site cleanup was primarily due to community partnerships and an important technological advancement developed at the site that cut cleanup time by 50 %—these became the focus of her message. Once she had considered her audience and framed the message, she reviewed the many delivery vehicles available to her. She felt any of the media tools outlined in the Toolkit would be good choices, especially those that lead to high visibility communication—network/cable television or a front-page newspaper article. By pushing the technological breakthrough angle, her message got regional front-page coverage.

Tips

- ◉ A communication strategy should be thorough, but not too elaborate. Since a communication strategy is just one of many tools available to CICs, do not try to write the definitive plan; just do your best and move on to the next task.

- ◉ A communication strategy should not replace the process of actually communicating with your customers.

- ◉ A communication strategy should be flexible enough to allow for changing messages.

- ◉ Consult your strategy often to remind yourself of your goals, messages, and audiences.

- ◉ Your message-specific strategies should define the most important ideas to communicate.

- ◉ Document successes and shortcomings to learn how your strategy might be improved.

- ◉ Work with your press officers to develop and implement the communication strategy, particularly at milestone events in the Superfund process.

- ◉ Revise your strategy if it is not producing results.

- ◉ Incorporate your strategy into the site *Community Involvement Plan*.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Related Tools/Resources in the Toolkit

- Community Interviews, Tab 5
- Community Involvement Plans, Tab 7
- Community Profile, Tab 8
- Cross-Cultural Communications, Tab 12
- Exhibits, Tab 13
- Focus Groups, Tab 17
- Informal Activities, Tab 20
- Internet, Tab 10
- Mailing List, Tab 23
- Media, Tab 25
- On-Site Activities, Tab 26
- Presentations, Tab 29
- Public Meetings, Tab 32
- Public Availabilities/Poster Sessions, Tab 30
- Public Notices, Tab 33
- Responsiveness Summaries, Tab 36
- Special Events, Tab 38
- Technical Assistance for Communities, Tab 41
- Telephone, Tab 42
- Translations Services, Tab 43
- Videos, Tabs 45
- Workshops, Tab 46

Attached Items Within this Tool

- Attachment 1: Sample Communication Strategy
- Attachment 2: Communications Strategy Matrix
- Attachment 3: How to Develop a Communication Strategy

Outside Sources of Information

- *Communicating With the Public: Ten Questions Environmental Managers Should Ask*. (For copies, please contact the Center for Environmental Communication, The State University of New Jersey, Rutgers, Cook College, P.O. Box 231, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 08903-0231. Telephone: (908) 932-8795. Fax: (908) 932-7815.)

Attachment 1: Sample Communication Strategy

An Informal Communication Strategy for Producing A Fact Sheet

Not every communication strategy has to be a formal, multi-page document with extensive details. For example, you might simply sketch an "Elements" matrix and then answer a series of questions to narrow the issues.

Q. What is the specific message to be conveyed?

A. While a mercury release has received extensive media attention, the limited release of mercury onto a 3-by-7 foot patch of soil at the site does not pose a public health threat. Nonetheless, parents should continue to warn their children to stay away from the site.

Q. Who *really* needs to know?

A. At first thought, probably just those adjacent to the site. However, the extensive media attention changes the scope of the task. Broad media communication will be necessary to counteract the media's message and convince the public there is no immediate threat.

Q. Why not use a public meeting instead of a fact sheet?

A. One public meeting would capture only some of the many potential target audiences for the message. A fact sheet can be more broadly disseminated and provides written material that can be easily reproduced and referenced again and again. Perhaps the release of the fact sheet might occur at an initial public meeting, thus combining two powerful communication vehicles.

Q. How much will correcting the perception created by the media cost in time and dollars?

A. It might cost very little if the media can be convinced to correct their story or even print/air a new story about the actual minimal risk created by this incident.

Q. What else should I be thinking about?

A. Local homeowners might be experiencing considerable fear and anxiety about the release and risks to their families. It is important to move fast and to be very clear about the message: there is no health threat from the mercury release.

ATTACHMENT 2: COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY MATRIX

ONE METHOD FOR CONSIDERING THE ELEMENTS OF YOUR STRATEGY

MESSAGE	AUDIENCE	POTENTIAL Vehicles	RESOURCES REQUIRED	FEEDBACK MECHANISM
Unexpected Release at Site	Public within 5-mile radius; beyond as appropriate	• Briefing • Fact Sheets • Press Release • Public Meeting	Primarily time, perhaps renting meeting space—unless a local library can provide space	• Survey at time of message delivery (*e.g.,* random telephone survey) • Attendance list to make a few follow-up calls
Release of Proposed Plan for Public Comment	Active citizen participants; Community Advisory Group; public as appropriate	• Public Meeting • Public Notices • Select Media Vehicles • Workshop	Meeting space; 4-6 hours of meeting time, depending on approach; as a "rule of thumb," workshop preparation should require at least twice as long as work-shop delivery (*i.e.*, for 2-hour workshop, at least 4 hours of preparation)	• Attendance list to make a few follow-up calls • Workshop evaluation form
Official Dele-tion from NPL	All stakehold-ers from local citizens to State and Regional government officials	• Celebration or Special Event • All Media Vehicles • Public Meeting • Open House	An article was written to announce the deletion and groundbreaking technology used. It also high-lighted the site's new beginning as a parking lot for the busy shopping area.	• Final site closeout survey to obtain feedback on community involvement and cleanup process

Attachment 3: How To Develop a Communication Strategy

The communication strategy is your plan for providing information and getting input about a specific issue. Here is a step-by-step approach for developing a communication strategy:

Issue: What is the issue/problem/action about which you need to communicate?

It is important that you know exactly what issue will be the focus of your strategy. If you try to communicate too many issues at once, you will confuse those you want to reach.

Goal: What do you want to achieve with your communication strategy?

- Do you only want to inform your audience?
- Do you want to make your audience aware of a problem?
- Are you trying to encourage your audience to take action?
- Are you trying to get your audience to change its behavior?
- Do you want information back from your audience?
- Do you want to involve them in solving the problem in addition to informing them about it?

Audience: Whom do you want to reach with your communication?

You will need to decide what groups or individuals you need to reach. To do this, determine who the stakeholders are. Ask yourself:

- Who is affected (or thinks they are affected) by the issue/problem/action?
- Who needs to be part of solving the problem?
- Who can stop you from addressing the problem?
- Who else needs to be involved?
- Who just needs to be kept informed?
- With whom do you need to coordinate your communications (and how will you do that)?

You may have different communication goals and need to use different communication tools for different groups of people.

Constraints: What are the difficulties you face in implementing your strategy?

It is important that you honestly identify the factors that will make accomplishing your goal difficult and think about ways to overcome these difficulties. For example:

- Do you have limited resources?
  - How can you best use the resources you have available to you?
  - Who might help?
  - Where can you get more resources?
- Do the groups you want to reach agree that there is a problem? (If they do not agree, it will be difficult to get them to help, and you must determine how to make them see the problem.)

Concerns: What are the concerns of various groups about this issue/problem/action?

You will need to identify the concerns that various other groups of stakeholders or other individuals have about what you are doing.

⊙ What can you do to remove or reduce these concerns?

⊙ How will you communicate this information?

Information Needs: What information do you need to gather?

In order to effectively implement your communication strategy, you may need to gather some information. For example, ask yourself:

⊙ What are the names, addresses, and phone numbers of the persons you want to reach?

⊙ What newspapers are available to the community?

⊙ Are some more effective at reaching the groups you want to reach?

⊙ What is their policy on letters to the editor?

⊙ Who is the editor and who is a key reporter?

⊙ Is there data you need to support your message?

Message(s):

Do not try to convey too many messages in any one communication. It is better to communicate a few clear messages than to say too much and confuse your audience. Before you deliver your message in person, be sure to practice and anticipate the questions you may receive. Ask yourself:

⊙ What is the clearest, most effective way to phrase what you want to say?

⊙ What questions are you likely to receive if you say what you plan to say?

Communication Tools:

Not all tools are equally effective for every purpose. Some are better for providing one-way information, while others are best suited for generating two-way discussion. Some are designed to reach large numbers of people, while others work best with a small group. Some are very expensive to use, others are not costly. Ask yourself:

⊙ What communication methods will most effectively reach the group(s) that you want to reach and achieve your communication goal?

Budget/Resources:

Ask yourself:

⊙ How much money do you have to implement the strategy?

⊙ How will you spend it?

⊙ What other resources are available — volunteers, donated in-kind resources?

Timing:

Ask yourself:

⊙ Do some communication activities need to happen before others?

⊙ Do you need to tie your communications to other events?

Activities/Schedule:

Develop a step-by-step list of communication actions. Include the planning steps needed to implement the activities.